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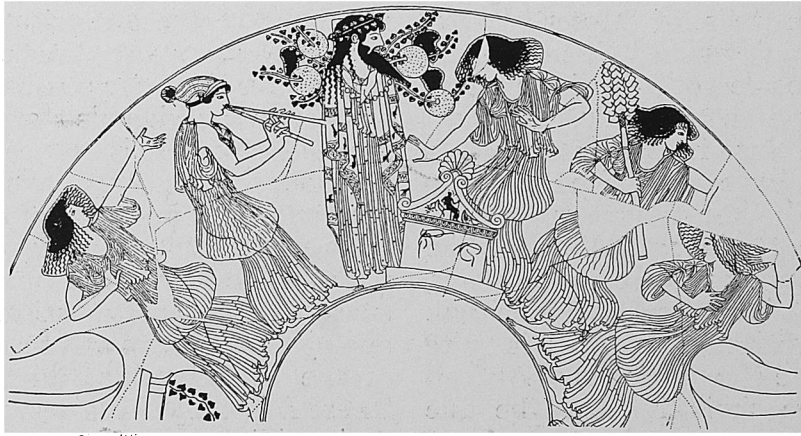
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FROM A GREEK VASE PAINTING

On Folk Music

BY JOHN TASKER HOWARD, JR.

WHAT is folk music? At first thought this query would seem simple to answer, for who is not familiar with the naïvete of the French *bergerette*, who has not heard the frenzied dance music of the Hungarians, or the bizarre folk songs of the Scandinavians? Who has failed to sense the child-like fervor of the Negro as he sings his spirituals?

When we think of folk music we think of its origin, for we have learned that the great majority of folk songs have sprung from who knows where. Herbert Spencer has said that feelings are muscular stimuli, and that consequently variations of voice are the physiological results of variations of feeling. If this be true, we have the explanation of countless folk songs of every nationality, for folk songs express the feelings of those who sing them. Take, for example, the Negro camp meeting. The preacher vividly recounts in his own delightful idiom the sins of his flock, and exhorts them to repentance. The gathering is surcharged with the intense emotions so marked in the African race, and during the impassioned, almost superstitious prayer of the "parson," various brethren who "see

the light" moan forth a fervent "O Lord," or a muttered "Amen," while the rest are praying, ever praying.

Suddenly the listener will hear these ejaculations become more and more musical, until they become a well defined melodic phrase. Someone in another part of the room improvises a response, the theme is taken up by others, and before many minutes have passed the whole congregation is singing a new folk song which has been conceived in the hearts of the worshippers.

Such meetings are becoming fewer in the Southland, for the Negroes are more and more breaking away from the traditions and habits of the slave days; but it is not to be doubted that many of the Negro spirituals, probably the great majority of them, owe their existence to these gatherings.

During the period of their slavery the Negroes sought comfort in song, and because their masters rarely permitted their singing of their own captivity and longing for freedom, they would express their desire by singing of other subject peoples, principally the Children of Israel. A noteworthy example of this type of song is the traditional "Go Down,

Moses," which tells of Moses, "Way down Egyp' Lan'," who "Tell ol' Pharaoh, Le' ma people go." In its existing form this song was probably born at a camp meeting, but it is a curious fact that Hebrews have recognized in "Go Down, Moses," a resemblance to an old Jewish chant, "Cain and Abel," while Negroes, on hearing the Hebrew melody, have recognized it as their own spiritual. This may be a coincidence, yet it is quite possible that the Negro song is of African origin, and the similarity may be due to the relation between the Negro and Semetic races on the African continent. How far back such an origin may date can only be surmised, for although our knowledge of the subject is very meagre, the ancient peoples must have had their folk music.

The origin of many folk songs of other peoples is doubtless analogous to the Negro gathering, although the folk music of other countries is not so largely inspired by religious (or must we say superstitious?) emotion. It is very likely that many Russian folk songs owe their existence to gatherings of the peasants on the village streets, where the outpourings of their oppressed spirits sought expression in song. Many folk songs are work songs; they have to do with the labors of the field, and are chanted in rhythmic cadence as the workers go about their duties. We can well imagine that they have originated from groups where one laborer intones a single phrase, another answers, and the musical phrases are repeated so often that they are indelibly stamped on the minds of the singers, who will hand them to their children to pass on, in turn, to the next generation.

The origin of some folk songs is probably similar to the origin of the ballad. One villager composes the first stanza, his neighbor adds another, and when the rest of the community has had its share the ballad is a lengthy affair.

The student of folk music will find much to interest him in the satirical songs of the creoles, which are composed impromptu by bards. One who escaped

the jibes of these musical satirists was indeed fortunate, or wealthy, for these songs have lived for centuries, and those who are thus ridiculed are remembered for their peculiarities years and years after they themselves have passed away. This custom is probably of African origin, for we know that in many of the African tribes there have been professional minstrels whose social position is singularly analogous to actors and secular musicians of the Europe of a few centuries ago. These African bards are so powerful, and their willingness to use their powers of improvisation so great, that all who can afford to do so, buy them off for whatever price they ask. Woe betide him who refuses!

Our understanding of folk music is by no means complete with songs of unknown origin, for we must not forget our "Suwanee River," the Scotch "Annie Laurie," "Loch Lomond," and countless other songs whose composer is known. Shall we say that these are not folk songs merely because they had a composer? Obviously not, and we must find room for them in our classification. We might well say that folk music consists of songs that are generally sung by the people of a country, or of a certain section or a province of a country. But then the sentimental ballad and the latest "jazz" hit of the "Great White Way" would be American folk music. We must qualify our definition!

We should bear in mind that the songs that come into being at the Negro camp meeting, the songs of the Russian peasant, yes, even the satirical songs of the creoles, are a vital expression of the temper of the people that gave them birth. Such songs are a part of these peoples' existence, and it is this quality that makes them *folk* music; they are *of the folk*.

While its origin is interesting and important, it is by no means vital to folk music. Music that springs from the hearts of a group is far more likely to breathe the emotions of that group than the product of a single mind, but there

have been men who have had the gift, well may we call it genius, of expressing the minds of their associates so faithfully, and with such simplicity and spontaneity that the people will take it to themselves for all time.

We cannot tell what songs of our day will be the folk songs of tomorrow. It may be that "rag-time" is *of us*. Then it will be incorporated in the American folk music of the future. But the public taste is too fickle for us to pass judgment on anything it fancies today. If a melody would retain its appeal from generation to generation its merit must be great.

Such is folk music, the music of a people which so expresses their feelings, their hopes, their joys and their sorrows as to become a vital part of their existence. Of false sentiment there must be none. Of merely transitory pleasure there can be no hint, for the joy of a folk song must be the happiness of a people, a happiness that has stood the test of years. Regardless of its origin, whether it be the aristocrat from the pen of a musical intellectual, or whether it be the mongrel offspring of the people themselves, to be a folk song a melody must be *of the people*.

Two Dramatists of the Mediæval

BY RICHARDSON WRIGHT

NO two dramatists would seem to be farther apart than Gabrielle D'Annunzio and Paul Claudel. The one serves quietly and with distinction, borne of long consular experience, as Minister Plenipotentiary of France to Brazil; the other has managed, by dint of valor, patriotic frenzy and military madness, to keep his name before the public these many months. No two lives, no two spiritual experiences or expressions could be more divergent. Yet, reading the one in the light of the other affords an illuminating contrast to those interested in the poetic drama and, incidentally, gives a fairly comprehensive view of mediævalism as expressed by two modern playwrights.

As dramatists neither D'Annunzio nor Claudel can be said to have met with great success. Neither of them has a sense of the theatre. Action, which is the *sine qua non* of modern dramatic conquest, is singularly lacking in the works of both men. Such action as their dramas require is hidden in the stage directions one does not gather it from the dialogue. Moreover, their dramas are poetical; and finally, they center their

interest in the Renaissance or other gorgeous and tragic periods of the vague past which call for more than casual acquaintance to appreciate. Despite these seeming limitations, their contributions to dramatic wealth are very great.

The backgrounds and development of the two men furnish a strange contrast. At an early age Claudel fell under the spell of Mallarmé, and consequently his first heritage was from the Symbolists. In his prose he became the debtor to Arthur Rimbaud. He experienced a sudden and uncompromising conversion to Catholicism, which gives him foundation and amply justifies our classing him with those other French literary Catholics—Huysmans, Paul Bourget, Francis Jammes, and Maurice Barres. There were later influences—as witness the Nietzschean will-to-power in *Tête d'Or* and the Greek touch (Claudel made an excellent translation of Agamemnon) in his Aeschylean types of women—but he still maintained an unflagging zeal for the faith. Claudel's approach to mediævalism is through the logical avenue of this faith. Today a man in his prime—he is only fifty-two—he has to his credit seven